Our Last HH-65A Flight

By Ltjg. Ian Neville-Neil, USCG and LCdr. Larry Littrell, USCG

We were enjoying another cool, summer night in Humboldt County, Calif., with surprisingly good visibility and clear skies. The air station just had completed the transition to the bravo model of the HH-65 but still had the last alpha model in the fleet (CGNO 6592). Our 6592 was just waiting to be flown back to Elizabeth City to be converted into a charlie model.

With a syllabus flight scheduled for that night (an unaided, night rescue-swimmer operation for a copilot's right seat upgrade), and several aircraft availability issues with the bravos, we decided to use 6592 one last time before sending her away. That thought alone, "one last time," should have, in and of itself, set off numerous warning tones.

We took off just after sunset, with an HH-65B providing cover, and positioned ourselves two miles off the coast. The bravo helo flew out to about 10 miles, giving each of us plenty of room to maneuver. We had mounted our night-vision goggles (NVGs), so we could roll right into aided ops in the event we finished the unaided portion early. After kicking out our rescue dummy, Sponge Bob, we harness-deployed the rescue swimmer from a 25-foot hover into the 56-degree-Fahrenheit Pacific Ocean. He disconnected and gave the "swimmer OK" sign.

As the rescue checklist part II was being completed for a basket recovery, I [the confident, suave, highly motivated pilot under instruction (PUI) in the right seat and at the controls] drifted closer to the rescue swimmer—a typical nugget mistake. The instructor pilot (IP)(oafish, self-absorbed, and in the left seat—not at the controls) asked where the rescue swimmer was. I replied, "At 2 o'clock."

Unable to visually acquire the swimmer though his windscreen, the IP leaned forward and right, looking out my windscreen. Still unable to spot the swimmer, he leaned back and his goggles, which still were in the up position, caught on the No. 1 fuel-flow-control lever (FFCL). This action almost brought the lever all the way back to idle.

At this moment, now frozen in time, several things happened very quickly. As I heard the engine spool down, I initiated a collective pull to set rotor rpm at 91.5 percent. I then put the aircraft in a wings level, nose on the horizon (accelerating) attitude per the flight manual.

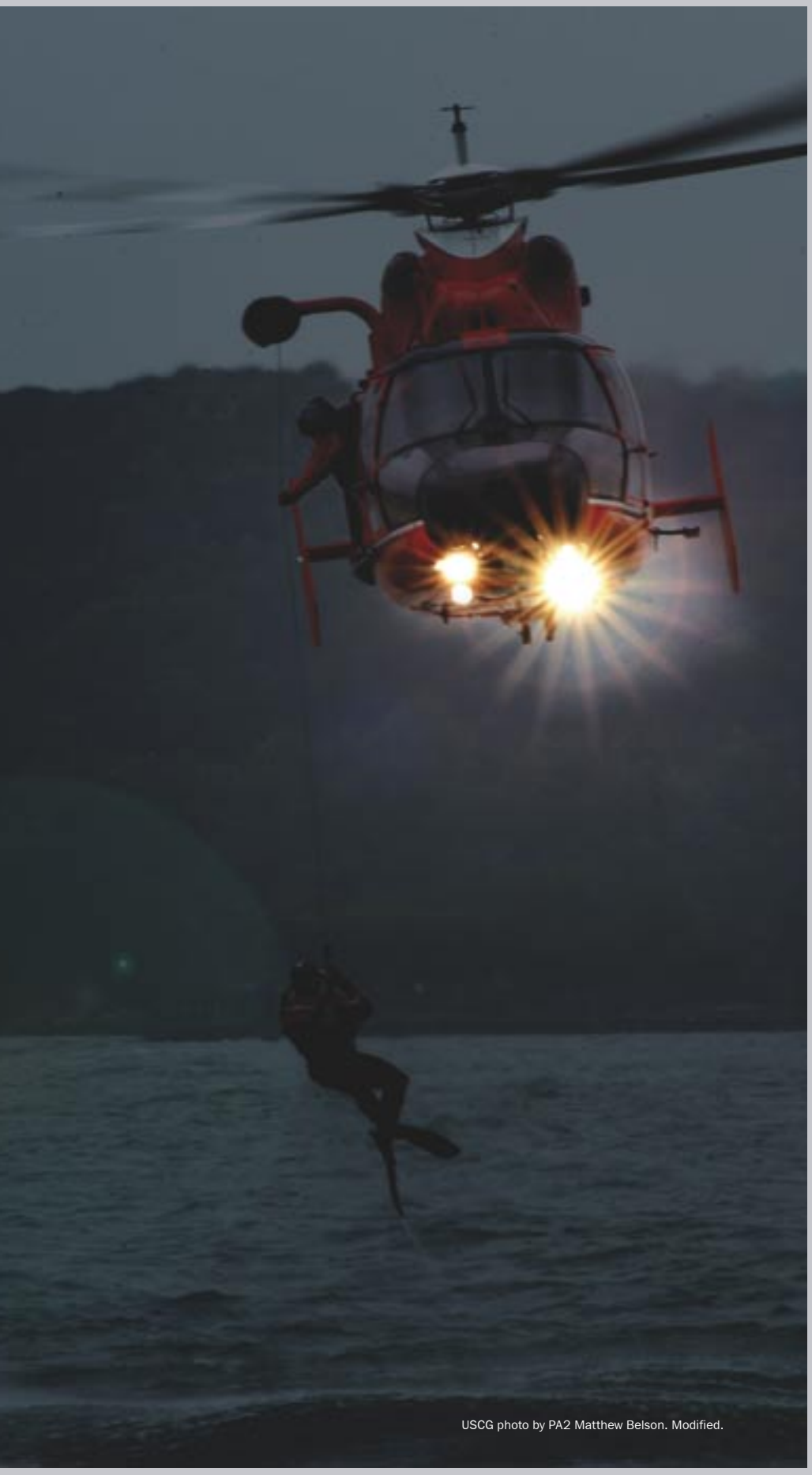
I still was wondering why we were doing simulated emergencies with a swimmer in the water when I realized this was for real. As I calmly reported "nose on the horizon," at only three octaves above my normal voice, the IP said, without even raising the pitch of his voice, "Transition."

Meanwhile, about 500 milliseconds later, the IP realized what had happened, and he pushed the No. 1 FFCL back to the flight-detent position. Since I still had an armpit full of collective, I was reminded of Newton's third law, "For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction." This law explained the "ringing of the bell," with simultaneous engine overspeeds and transmission over-torques that we had.

Once forward flight was achieved, I started a right-hand orbit to keep the rescue swimmer in sight. I then established comms with the swimmer and directed the cover helo to move in and recover him. We continued to evaluate the warning lights and instruments to make sure the aircraft would continue to fly until the cover aircraft arrived.

About four minutes later (which felt like two days), the cover aircraft reported, "Rescue swimmer in sight."

From there, we had a two-minute flight back to base where we flew a running landing, taxied to the line, and pulled our undergarments and seat cushions out of some uncomfortable places.



USCG photo by PA2 Matthew Belson. Modified.

On a side note, we later learned that, as we were wondering if our SGLI was current, the rescue swimmer, upon hearing the engine spool down, was doing his best Mark Spitz impression in the opposite direction. I think he is ready for the next Olympic tryouts.

A few learning points came out of the ensuing discussion and mishap report. First, we were not the only people who have bumped the FFCLs with the NVGs, though apparently we are the only crew to have succeeded in pulling them out of the flight detent. Second, in the charlie model, this problem won't exist, because toggle switches replace fuel-control levers. Third, it might behoove us to keep the cover helo a bit closer, just in case its services are needed. Finally, learn, love, and live those emergency procedures; you never know when your life may depend on them.

The time it takes an object (a helicopter, for instance) to fall from 25 feet is 1.25 seconds—Newtonian physics once again. I believe we only dropped 5 to 10 feet, but that was more than enough for us. Fast thinking and faster action were the saviors of our intrepid aircrew that night. As I later told a friend of mine, "At least our drysuits were still dry on the outside."

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